

Gilles Deleuze

An Introduction

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How Might One Live?

I

How might one live?

It's an odd question, in some sense; a question we don't ask ourselves very often. We get up in the morning, we brush our teeth, we crawl into our clothing, and burn our days as though it were impossible to live any other way, as though this particular life were the only one to be lived. As though the universe were so constructed that it required our lives to unfold in this way and in no other.

Of course that isn't what we tell ourselves. Our stories are always filled with choices, with crossroads and tangents and directions of our own making. Our lives' narratives, when we tell them to ourselves or to others, are steeped in the discarding of certain futures and the embrace of others, in the construction of a world that is to each of us uniquely our own because each of us has chosen it. But is that how we live? Is that how our lives, so often conforming, so often predictable, so often disappointing, come to be what they are?

How many of us ask ourselves, not once and for all time but frequently and at different times, *how might one live?* How many of us embrace that question, not only in our stories but in our actions, our projects, our commitments? How many of us open the door to the possibility that, however it is we are living, we might live otherwise?

II

Perhaps it is not up to each of us to ask this question. Perhaps, instead, it falls to philosophy, as a special study, to address it. What is the meaning of life? What are its purposes? How should one live? How might one live? These are questions that philosophers ask; they report their results to us, and we, if we choose, may read and assess them for their insights.

Philosophers rarely ask these questions. They rarely ask them in their work, and seem rarely to do so outside of it.

Part of the reason for this is historical. The twentieth century saw the division of Western philosophy into two distinct traditions. Britain and the United States embraced analytic philosophy, which treated these questions as though they fell outside the purview of philosophy. For some of those working in this tradition, the role of philosophy was to clarify the limits and range of scientific claims; for others, it was to understand the nature and functioning of language. The idea that philosophy might grapple with questions of our living was seen as a sort of conceptual confusion. Philosophy is to reflect on our knowledge and our language; it is to tell us how they work, or how they ought to work. To widen the tasks of philosophy to include a reflection on what we ought to become or might become is to introduce external, perhaps even incoherent, concerns into a discipline that seeks to achieve rigor and precision above all.

The historical situation for British and American philosophy has changed over the past thirty years. Since the publication of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, it has become more nearly acceptable, in keeping with earlier periods in philosophy, to write and to think about the larger questions concerning our lives. The weight has lifted, but it has not been removed. Nearly a century of analytic work has instilled philosophical habits that are difficult to break. Those who are writing about normative matters still risk ridicule by those doing "hard" philosophy; they are still haunted by the fear of analytic failure. Too often, rather than harnessing the rigor of analytic philosophy to the task of asking these larger, more diffuse questions, instead the questions themselves are sacrificed or amputated in order to preserve the rigor of the method.

The other tradition in twentieth-century philosophy has come to be called the Continental tradition, since it focuses particularly on works

written in France, Germany, and to a lesser extent Italy. In this tradition, the question of how one might live has never been lost, even though at times it has been eclipsed by other concerns. The major thinkers in this tradition, from Martin Heidegger through Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, are never far from questions about the nature and possibilities of our living. And yet, here in the United States, where Continentally oriented philosophers are often studying the works of these thinkers, there is a tendency toward specialization that blunts the power of the larger questions. Perhaps because in so many other disciplines, the academy values the small nuance, the concrete accomplishment, the incremental result, many Continentally oriented philosophers are wont to spend less time engaged with the larger questions that animate a thinker's work. Instead they become engaged in the interpretation of some small corner of thought, an assessment of the accuracy of X's rendering of Y's interpretation of some marginal aspect of Z's work. (I am as guilty of this as are any of my philosophical colleagues, and so any fingers pointed here are directed also at me.)

In this book, I would like to hold out against that tendency and offer an interpretation of Gilles Deleuze that, even when weaving together details of his thought, remains mindful of and oriented toward the one question that is never far from his texts: how might one live? Although his thought is among the most esoteric, and even obscure, of recent thinkers, it is, rightly seen, nothing other than an engagement with that question. In a world that holds banality to be a virtue and originality a disease, Deleuze never stops asking the question of what other possibilities life holds open to us, or, more specifically, of how we might think about things in ways that would open up new regions for living. "*We do not even know of what a body is capable*, says Spinoza."¹

III

The question of *how might one live* is not always the question that has been asked in philosophy by those who are concerned with how our lives might go. It is a question that has emerged over the course of the

¹ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 226.

twentieth century, in the wake created by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Sartre.

In ancient philosophy, the question was: *How should one live?* As the philosopher Bernard Williams has written, it is Socrates' question. "It is not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live."² The question of how one should live involves a particular way of approaching life. It views life as having a shape: a life – a human life – is a whole that might be approached by way of asking how it should unfold. What is the course a human life should take? What are the best pursuits for a human being and how should those pursuits be arranged? What is the proper role for human beings in the universe?

Over the course of the modern period, the question *How should one live?* has been gradually replaced by another one. By the late eighteenth century, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham are addressing a different question. No longer is the concern with how one should live, with the shape one's life should take. Now the question is *How should one act?*

On the surface, it may seem that the question of how one should act is the same as that of how one should live. One lives through one's acts, does one not? And if so, then the shape of one's life will be nothing more than the sum of one's acts. These are not two different questions, they are instead two different forms of the same question.

Appearances here are deceiving. There are two significant differences behind the question asked by the ancients and that asked by the moderns that inflect the answers to these questions in different directions. First, for the ancients, the question of how one should live is asked within a context that assumes the existence of a cosmological order to which a good life must conform. A human life does not exist divorced from the cosmological whole within which it is embedded. It has a role to play that ought to converge with or at least complement the movement of the rest of the universe. For Plato, that role consists in seeking the Good; for Aristotle it is a matter of living out a specifically human teleology. Neither doubts, nor do others, such as the Stoics or the Epicureans, doubt, that the universe has an order to it, a stability and a general form that ought to be mirrored or conformed to by the lives of human beings.

² Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 1.

Modern philosophy writes within a context that jettisons the guiding assumption of a cosmological order. This does not mean that there is no God or that God has no efficacy in shaping the universe. The traces of God's work remain salient everywhere. It is the role of the human being that has changed. No longer does a human life find its significance in a larger order of which it is a part. Rather, a life is judged on its own merits. It answers to God or to the moral law, not to any order in which it might be embedded. Men and women stand alone before their acts and before the judge to whom those acts are submitted. There is no larger whole (or at least no whole larger than one's society) that requires one's participation.

This change has been known as the rise of individualism or alternatively the rise of the subject in modern philosophy.

The second change is inseparable from the first. We might call it the emergence of a democratic philosophy. Where there is order there is often hierarchy, and there is hierarchy in ancient order. Not only does each creature have a *place* in the cosmological order; it also has a *status*. That status involves dominance over creatures that lie below it and submission to those above. Slaves are to submit to their masters, women to their husbands. In this order, humans, particularly free males, have a privileged status in the cosmological order. Nevertheless, they too must submit to the larger whole of the cosmos itself and to those elements in the cosmos that lie above them. (One might take Plato's Good to be such an element.)

The modern period, in cutting adrift from the ancient moorings in a cosmological order, also frees itself from the hierarchies of dominance and submission inherent in that order. It casts aside the assumption of a cosmological higher and lower. Individualism is not simply a matter of divorcing oneself from the inherence in a cosmological role; it is also a divorce from the status conferred upon one inhabiting that role. With this divorce, we can glimpse the opening toward democracy and equal citizenship toward which we are still striving today.

By withdrawing allegiance to a cosmological order and by leveling out the status of human beings, the modern period becomes less concerned with the overall shape of one's life. It does not matter what the whole of a life looks like; it matters whether one is acting in the right way, whether one is fulfilling one's obligations. I no longer have to seek my rightful place in the order of things. Instead I must ask what

my proper actions are, those that, as a member of society and as an individual before God, I am required to perform.

My actions, then, are distinct from my life as a whole. In fact, in the modern period the concern with one's life as a whole is diminished. Some philosophers have taken this languishing of concern with a whole life as a philosophical loss. The question *How should one act?* divorces one's deeds from oneself in a way that is alienating. Our morality fails to be integrated into our lives; it exists out there, apart from the rest of our existence. If a person is forced to ask about how to act without at the same time seeing the answer to that question as being related to one's particular life, then one's relation to morality becomes fissured. We need to return, these philosophers suggest, to the ancient question, to allow it to renew its hold on us so that once again we may be addressed by philosophy in the space in which we live.

Other philosophers defend the emergence of the modern question as an advance upon the ancient one. Narrowing the focus of the question from lives to action corresponds to a widening of the realm of freedom to choose the life one would like to create. Philosophy should not legislate over the course of one's life; it should not determine the shape it should take, or even whether a life should have a coherent shape. If the rise of individualism and the decline of inequality are to have a meaning for our lives, it is that we can now determine (within the limits prescribed by the answer to the question of *how one should act*) the course and direction of our lives. Each of us must answer to the obligations laid out before him or her; beyond that, philosophy has no business legislating who we ought to be or ought to become. That is our private concern.

In the Continental tradition in philosophy, the modern question gave rise to a third question, one with which we continue to grapple today. Its roots are found scattered throughout the nineteenth century, but nowhere are they given as much nourishment as in the thought of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the central event of the late nineteenth century is the death of God. However this death might have occurred (Nietzsche offers different accounts at different points in his work), the implication is profound for human life. Those before Nietzsche who have asked the question of how one should act, almost to a philosopher, have found the answer anchored in a transcendent being, in God. It is a God outside this world that assures us of our obligations within it. The

death of God, then, is not merely the demise of a certain theological existence; it is the vanishing of the transcendence in which our morality is grounded. With Nietzsche, not only is there no cosmological order in which to anchor the meaning of our lives, there is also no transcendent set of standards by which to guide our actions. We lack the means we have relied upon to answer the question of how we should act.

We might try to discover other resources that offer guidance in addressing the question of how we should act, resources that are grounded in our own world rather than in a transcendent one. Some philosophers, mostly in the analytic tradition, have taken this route. Nietzsche does not. He is uninterested in the question of how we ought to act; for him, the question is merely a remnant of the period before the death of God. It is an archaism, a bit of nostalgia.

The death of God offers us a new question, one that jettisons the concern with both cosmic roles and individual obligations: *How might one live?*

In Nietzsche's hands, this new question becomes a challenge, a gauntlet thrown at the feet of those whose lives are too narrow. What the long history of asking the questions of how should one live and how should one act has bequeathed us are sad small creatures that can no longer set worthy tasks before us. We have become a species of the petty gesture and the whining complaint. We castigate ourselves with a transcendent (God, the Good) that we can never achieve and whose only function is to reinforce that very castigation. We define ourselves not by what we might create but by what we might hold back from creating; we are our self-denial. In the meantime, what we might be capable of goes not only unanswered but unasked. Those who have the temerity to ask are quickly silenced or removed to the social margins.

It is the death of God and the consequent vanishing of transcendence that reopens the question for us, allowing us to enlarge our lives beyond the limits our history had set for us. Once again we can ask what we might make of ourselves in this world, the world we inhabit. We can stop denying our larger dreams and projects in the name of a transcendence that judges us, and free ourselves instead for what is most noble in our nature.

Much of Continental thought over the course of the twentieth century can be seen as a response to Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. If God is dead, if we are no longer judged by a

transcendence that both diminishes and sustains us, then how might we or how ought we to make our way in the world? How should we think of ourselves? How should we articulate who we are and what we can become?

Jean-Paul Sartre takes up these questions, inaugurating, at least in its contemporary form, the existentialism that forms the immediate legacy of the death of God: "if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses."³ There is no God. There is no transcendent judge for our acts. We are more alone than the individualism of the modern question could have imagined. We face a future that will be created by decisions that each of us will make with no standard to guide us.

That Sartre, at moments, withdraws from the implications of his own thought is undeniable. In the same pages he announces the vertigo of human freedom, the groundlessness of human choice, he seeks to reintroduce the question of how one ought to act and even to give it a traditional modern answer. But it is too late; the cat is out of the bag. There is no longer a question of how one should live, or how one should act. There is only a question of how one might live.

IV

It is a difficult question, and a frightening one. There is much in us that rebels against confronting it, taking it into our lives and creating ourselves in light of the freedom it offers. It is simpler just to brush our teeth, crawl into our clothing, and burn our days than to ask what we might become. And, as Sartre himself begins to realize in his later years, there is also much outside of our own reticence that militates against our asking the question. The structure of society, the weight of history, the legacy of our language all conspire to keep the question from us, and to keep us from it. Our conformity is not solely a result of individual cowardice; it is built into the world we inhabit.

Several recent French philosophers have forged their philosophical views in the shadow cast by conformity. They have sought to free us

³ Sartre, "Existentialism," p. 23.

from the grip of the structures and forces that produce and reproduce conformity. These philosophers have exposed these structures in our thinking and offered paths to escape them. They have recognized that there is an intimate bond between the ways in which we think about ourselves and our world and the ways in which we construct our lives, and they have sought to address that thinking in order to reach us in our living. In doing so they have nourished the question of how one might live, clearing a space for its asking and for the living that would accompany it.

Deleuze is among these philosophers, but he is by no means the only one. Two others, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, have taken different approaches to the challenge and offered different routes into the question of how one might live. In order to see the peculiarity of Deleuze's own philosophical path, it might be contrasted with Foucault's and Derrida's.

Foucault's works take some of the constraints that seem natural and inevitable to us in order to show that they are, contrary to appearances, historical and contingent. There are aspects of our world that seem to be immune from change. We must conform to the limits they place before us and order our world with those limits in mind. This is more deeply true, and more deeply constraining, when those limits are not merely placed upon us from the outside like barriers but are instead woven into the very fabric of human existence. To attempt to surpass such limits, to seek to live otherwise, would be futile. Far from being a sign of liberation, the project of living otherwise would be a symptom of abnormality. For Foucault, historical study reveals to us that many of these "internal" limits arise not from the constitution of our being but from the politics of our relationships. They are neither natural nor inescapable. "There is an optimism that consists," he writes, "in saying that things couldn't be better. My optimism would consist in saying that so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constraints."⁴

It might seem to be inscribed in the order of things, for instance, that there is a normal course for sexuality to take, and that other courses are deviations from that norm. Homosexuality, bisexuality, promiscuity,

⁴ Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," p. 156.

even female sexual initiative have been in various periods – including our own – accounted as unnatural, as symptoms of a deviance that requires at least intervention and perhaps punishment. To treat homosexuality as a project of pleasure rather than as an expression of abnormality would be to ignore the violation of normal human sexuality that it constitutes. Moreover, to treat a homosexual as something other than a homosexual, to see him or her as defined by something *other than* sexual orientation, is to miss the central element of his or her being. If homosexuality is abnormal, it is an abnormality that swallows up the rest of one's existence; every gesture, every emotion is reducible to the core fact of the homosexuality. That is why it seems so important to intervene. What is at stake is not simply a deviant form of activity; it is a deviant form of life.

But is sexuality naturally or inevitably divided into the normal and the abnormal? Isn't this division rather a historical one, one that serves certain interests and denies others? Foucault argues that it is. Many historians have shown that the concept of homosexuality, for instance, is a recent one, and one that arises not so much from scientific discovery as from psychological categorization. What Foucault adds is the recognition that the central place that sexuality itself occupies in Western culture is a historically determined one. Its importance derives less from a process of neutral intellectual inquiry than from changes in such far-flung practices as the Catholic confessional and population studies, changes which promote the view of desire as constitutive of human beings and of sexuality as the central mode of desire. The result of these changes is to promote both a sexual conformity and, through it, a general social conformity that converge with the economic requirements of capitalism, the political requirements of liberal democracy, and the epistemological requirements of the human sciences such as psychology.

What is true of sexuality is true also for other constraints that the human sciences present to us. "All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made."⁵ Far from being determined by immobile "anthropological constraints," we are instead molded by

⁵ Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," p. 11.

historical and political forces that can be modified, changed, perhaps even overthrown. The problem – the *philosophical* problem – is that we fail to recognize the historical character of these constraints, and so fail to recognize the freedom before us. We are unable to ask ourselves, in any but the most constricted fashion, how one might live.

If Foucault's approach to the question of how one might live is historical, Jacques Derrida's might be called more nearly linguistic. Derrida shares with Foucault a concern about the constraints our world has placed upon us. Like Foucault, he believes that those constraints arise primarily in the categories by means of which we conceptualize ourselves and our world. Unlike Foucault, however, Derrida finds these constraints to lie in the structure of language. Our oppression is not merely in our historical legacy, but in our very words. Each time we speak, we rely on constraints that haunt our language and that deny us access to addressing the question of how one might live. Because of this, the means to counter those constraints will involve not simply the recognition and overcoming of our historical inheritance; they will involve a nuanced and fragile approach to language itself.

Derrida points out that the project of philosophy consists largely in attempting to build foundations for thought. These foundations work by privileging certain philosophical themes and concepts at the expense of others. Presence is privileged at the expense of absence, identity at the expense of difference, masculinity at the expense of femininity, the literal at the expense of the metaphorical, principles at the expense of sensitivity. In each case of privileging, however, matters turn out to be more complicated than they might seem. It is not merely that it is unjust to privilege one term at the expense of its complement (although there is an injustice there). More deeply, the problem is that the privileged term is, in part, *constituted by the complement*. In philosophical systems that are centered on the concept of presence, that presence cannot be conceived except on the basis of the absence it excludes. Absence does not appear as an other, outside of presence, against which it is understood. It is internal to presence. If we were to put the matter paradoxically, we might say that pure presence can be understood only on the basis of an absence that inhabits it and is partially constitutive of it.

This does not mean that the complements melt into each other, becoming a third category that incorporates the features of each. Rather,

they operate in a dynamic relation of distinctness and mutual envelopment where the line between them can be neither clearly drawn nor completely erased.

This dynamic, or, as Derrida sometimes calls it, this “economy” of complementary terms – each bleeding into the other without one being able to fix the borders of their meanings – has at least two implications. First, it undercuts the project of philosophical foundationalism, the project of building a final and unsurpassable foundation for thought. If one cannot fix the meaning of the philosophical terms one uses, if those terms are constantly infiltrated by the terms they are trying to exclude, then the foundations themselves will be porous, and in the end unable to hold. It is as though the structure itself will seep into the foundation. This is because, as Derrida recognizes, the project of philosophy is a linguistic one; philosophy is a practice whose medium is words. And, he argues, because of the economy of complementary terms, those words will never be able to be fixed in a way that is solid enough to provide the type of foundation philosophy seeks.

This does not mean that the exclusions – of absence, of the feminine, of difference, of metaphor – are overcome. Nor does it mean that the privilegings – of presence, of the masculine, of identity, of the literal – are just. There is still an injustice, a marginalization that must be addressed. Philosophy, as well as everyday thought, still operates by means of these privilegings. They continue to dictate our approach to ourselves and the world. Overcoming this injustice, however, is not a matter of simply inverting the privilege these terms have enjoyed or of trying instead to render them equally privileged. Both approaches would repeat the deeper problem Derrida finds in traditional philosophy. They are attempts to fix the terms once and for all rather than to recognize their fluidity. Instead, we must allow the fluidity of terms to remain in play, to negotiate our language in ways that do not suppress but instead allow expression to the economy inherent in it.

If it is language’s character to operate by an economy of complementary terms, and if the attempt to deny that economy by fixing the meanings of terms is both futile and unjust, then the approach to language that must be taken is to think and to speak and to write differently. This is primarily a philosophical project, but, like a lot of philosophy, its effects will ripple out into the wider culture.

What bearing does Derrida's approach to philosophy and its language have upon the question of how one might live? By shaking the foundations of the categories through which we conceive ourselves and our world, Derrida opens up new ways of thinking about ourselves, ways that no longer conform to the categories we have inherited. In fact, they do not conform to the idea of categories. When, for instance, we no longer privilege the masculine over the feminine, when we see that these categories bleed into each other, then we are no longer worried about the "essence" of the masculine or the feminine. We become free to borrow from realms that once seemed barred from us. Moreover, we are no longer bound to make those borrowings conform to a pre-given model of what our lives and our world should look like, since the categories within which we would conceive our lives and our world are themselves fluid.

Just as Foucault seeks to reawaken the question of how one might live by showing that what appear to be necessary constraints on our existence are in fact historically contingent, Derrida seeks to reawaken the question by showing that what appear to be strict categories of experience are in fact fluid and interwoven. Beneath these projects there is a deeper bond. Both reject a certain traditional philosophical project that falls under the rubric of *ontology*.

The term *ontology* has several different meanings in philosophy. In the analytic tradition, it means "the study of what there is," either in general or in some specific area. What are the ultimate constituents of the universe? Is everything that exists ultimately physical matter or do such things as numbers or ideas or sets also exist? Or, at a more specific level, what are the constituents of psychology: the mind, behavior, bodies in interaction? Can we reduce psychological accounts of human existence to purely physical ones? These are among the questions pondered by ontology in analytic thought. In Continental thought, ontology has come to mean "the study of being (or Being)." This approach takes its cue from the work of Martin Heidegger, who argues that over the course of Western philosophy, stretching as far back as Plato, the "question of Being" has been forgotten and needs to be recovered. What is being? What is the meaning of being? What is it for something to *be*? These are the driving questions of ontology among Continental thinkers.

There can be a convergence between analytic and Continental approaches to ontology. Both ask about the nature of what there is. But their inflections on this asking are different. Analytic philosophers are interested in the beings of which the universe is constituted. They seek to account for the nature and existence of those beings and their relationships to one another. Continental philosophers often see a question of being that cannot be addressed in terms of constituent beings. Following Heidegger, they see in the attempt to reduce the question of being to that of beings a symptom of an age that is too ready to accept the terms in which science conceives the world.

For their part Derrida and Foucault both reject ontology in the first, analytic, sense.

Foucault rejects any ontology of human being, any account of the ultimate nature of human being. When he says that all of his analyses are against the idea of necessities in human existence, he is refusing to engage in an ontology of the human. What appear to be ontological matters are in reality historical matters parading in ontological garb. We are taught that there are certain norms, tendencies, and orientations that human beings, by virtue of being human, possess. There are specific sexual, psychological, cognitive, and emotional lives that are characteristically human. To fail to live in accordance with these characteristically human lives is to fail to be fully human. It is to be abnormal. The lesson of Foucault's histories is that what is considered characteristically human, and therefore normal, is the product of a politically charged history. Abnormality need not be seen as a violation of the norms of human existence. It can as well be a refusal to conform to the "ontological" requirements of a given historical moment.

Derrida's rejection of ontology occurs not at the level of specific human ontologies but at the level of the terms used to fix any ontology. What vitiates the ontological project in his eyes concerns the language in which an ontology would be articulated. Any ontology is an attempt to give an exhaustive account of what there is, to discover some essential nature at the bottom of things. But if linguistic terms are permeable in the way Derrida thinks, then the very terms in which that nature is articulated will be haunted by terms they are trying to exclude. There is no path to an account of an essential nature that would not be permeated by the nonessential as an inextricable aspect.

The project of constructing an ontology that separates what is from what is not is doomed by the economy of the terms it uses.

Whether Foucault or Derrida reject ontology in the second, Continental, sense is a more difficult question. Foucault is largely uninterested in the question of being. Derrida, by contrast, sees himself as following through on many of Heidegger's concerns.⁶ What they would certainly reject, however, would be any approach to the question of being by means of an account that says, ultimately, what there is. For both Foucault and Derrida any approach to the question of being that goes by means of an account of an unchanging, pure nature or essence is misguided, for either historical or linguistic reasons. Misguided, and worse than misguided: harmful. To address the question of being by means of an account of what there is would seem to constrain human behavior to a narrow conformity. It would fail to keep alive the question of how one might live.

And that is the point at which they diverge from Deleuze, who approaches the question of how one might live not by abandoning ontology, but by embracing it.

V

Deleuze's works are steeped in ontology. Each work posits a new group of fundamental entities or reworks entities from previous works into a new context. To read Deleuze is to be introduced into a world of proliferating beings and new forms of life. These beings and forms of life are not a part of our everyday experience. Nevertheless they inhere in the fabric of our existence.

While Foucault and Derrida seek to unravel the pretensions of ontology as a study of what there is, Deleuze revels in ontological creation and analysis. While Foucault and Derrida find ontology to be a threat to asking how one might live, Deleuze finds ontology to be the very route one must take in order to ask about it adequately. While Foucault and Derrida offer alternatives to the traditional philosophical project of ontology, Deleuze drives that project to its limit, a limit at which he

⁶ Deconstruction is in many ways a continuation of Heidegger's *Destruktion* of traditional philosophy, and *differance* may be read as an approach to Heidegger's ontic-ontological difference.

finds the question of how one might live to be raised afresh and ready to offer surprising answers.

By embracing ontology as the study of what there is Deleuze does not only go against the anti-ontological trend of much of twentieth-century philosophy. His work also cuts against the grain of those who have approached the question of how one might live. For Deleuze's predecessors and contemporaries, breathing life into that question requires abandoning what had been considered ontologically necessary, eliminating the search for entities that constrain us to asking questions less radical than that of how one might live. For Nietzsche the question of how one might live is opened up by the death of God, that is, the loss of any constraining ontological transcendence. For Sartre existentialism involves a recognition that nothing makes us be what we are, that we are free to create ourselves without an essential ontological nature that dictates the inescapable course of our lives. For Foucault the identities offered to us by our history must be recognized as contingent rather than necessary, as passing phenomena rather than ontological requirements. Only then will we be able to ask the question of how one might live without already constricting the answer to the conformity that forms the ether of our world. Finally, for Derrida the rigid ontologies of traditional philosophy veil the fluidity of their terms, a fluidity that undercuts the very project of saying what there is and what there is not. That fluidity must be unveiled if we are to reopen the question of how one might live.

It would seem that if one hopes to address the question of how one might live in a way that does not reinforce a tired conformity, then ontology – at least inasmuch as it is the study of what there is – is the problem rather than the solution.

Is this the inescapable fate of ontology? Must it disappear from the field of philosophical reflection if our task is to ask the question of how one might live without falling back either into concerns about how one should act or how one ought to live or into an unquestioning conformism?

Deleuze denies this in his work. He denies it by creating an ontology, or rather a series of ontologies, that challenge two assumptions underlying the rejection of an ontological approach to the question. The first assumption is that ontology involves discovery rather than creation. What other thinkers who have been grasped by the question

of how one might live have assumed is that ontology is an attempt to *discover* the nature of the universe's fundamental entities. Why must one see ontology as a matter of discovery, however, as opposed to *creation*? It is true that philosophers who engage in ontology almost universally see themselves as attempting to glean the essential character of what there is. They assume that the study of what there is consists of accounting in the most adequate fashion for the nature of what exists. And it is precisely this assumption that has worried those who ask the question of how one might live. Such accounting seems always to be a reduction of possibilities, a narrowing of perspective that ends up impoverishing the universe. A universe composed solely of physical entities in more or less predictable relationships with one another, a humanity characterized by narrow norms of behavior, a realm of entities rigidly demarcated from one another: these are worlds that constrict rather than widen the question of how one might live.

Is this how ontology must be done? Are we excluded from approaching ontology another way? Suppose we were to see the study of what there is as a creation rather than a discovery, or, better, as a project where the distinction between creation and discovery is no longer relevant. Suppose that ontology were not a project of seeking to grasp what there is in the most accurate way. Suppose instead ontology were to construct frameworks that, while not simply matters of fiction, were not simply matters of explanation either. Is it not possible to invert the traditional relationship, so that the question of how one might live is no longer based upon the question of what there is but vice versa? In other words, could one not create an ontology whose purpose is to open the question of how one might live to new vistas? Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida have shown the constrictions that arise when the question of how one might live must answer to ontology. Deleuze suggests that it is possible to move in the opposite direction, to create an ontology that answers to the question of how one might live rather than dictating its limits.

Such an ontology would not only invert the traditional relationship between creation and discovery. It would also invert the traditional relationship between identity and difference. This is the second assumption about ontology that Deleuze challenges. It is intertwined with the first one.